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Indian Mass Media and the Politics of Change

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Dedicated to the memory of Sacredmediacow

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Circulating Intimacies: Sex Surveys, Marriage and Other Facts of Life in Urban India*

Kriti Kapila

In June 2003, KamaSutra, a leading condom manufacturer in India made public the results of what it claimed was the first-ever all-India sex survey. The results of the survey were reported widely by the media and generated much public interest (e.g., Sawhney 2003a; 2003b; Kuriakose 2003; Fernandez 2003). Interpreting the survey's figures, journalists and commentators unanimously concluded that the sexual habits of Indians, especially those of women, were undergoing a massive change. This was curious, given that there was little by way of previous baselines from which such a perception of change could be compared and assessed. In this article I attend to the nature and the consequences of the information made available through the publication of these sex surveys, and seek to understand why and how public perceptions of social change emerge. I discuss the processes entailed in the (re)constitution of public discourses on sexual intimacies in India. Examining the curious configuration, where the media was both an initiator of a certain kind of information about sexual habits, as well as the provider

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of a meta-commentary on that information, I assess how an emerging public discourse might shape people's understanding of sexual intimacy, both in terms of its categories and in terms of its language. In order to do so, I examine two different articulations by middle-class Indians of their own sexuality: first, media reports of all-India sex-surveys, and second, women's narratives of their sexual histories posted on a popular India-based website and collected in an ethnographic context.

Any understanding of intimacy first requires an analytical separation between the experience of sexual intimacy and public discourses on sex and sexuality. In the context of India, this poses a special challenge because of the ways in which monogamous heterosexual conjugality has successively gained pre-eminence in the public mind (Chakrabarty 1994; Chaterjee 1994; Bhattacharjee 1992; Patel 2004), so that the changing nature of marriage has become a barometer for the changing nature of sexual intimacy (Kapila 2004). In other words, sex and marriage in India are linked inextricably, at least in the public mind. In trying to understand the extent to which this is so, this article is a conversation with Elizabeth Povinelli's work on gridlocked intimacies and the reading of Jurgen Habermas (1989) on which it depends (Povinelli 2002). Povinelli discusses the concept of the 'intimacy grid' as a way of understanding 'the power of generative grammar(s)' in characterising and representing the subject of intimacy (ibid.: 223). According to Povinelli, not all intimate worlds gain public recognition. In examining the centrality of the concept of intimacy and its links to legitimate sexual activity in two seemingly different politics of recognition — one around the erasing of intimate histories of aboriginal populations in contemporary Australia, and another around the recognition of intimacy within gay families in Euro-America — she suggests that intimacy is itself gridlocked within heterosexual and genealogical models (ibid.: 217). Following Povinelli, I explore the hemming in of public recognition of certain kinds of intimacies. But in departure from her analysis, I locate the gridlocking of contemporary urban Indian intimacies not just within the code of genealogy (or, descent), but equally within the code of conjugality (or, alliance). This, I argue has repercussions for the way in which intimate worlds are articulated, claimed and recognised in the public domain.

Part of Povinelli's analysis is concerned with the degree to which certain social forms and relations fall off established grid(s) of intimacy and genealogy and become literally 'un-recognisable' and/or de-legitimised (Povinelli 2002: 224). She draws on Habermas's well-known thesis of the relation between textuality and new forms of interiorised relations with self and others, or what he terms 'experiments in subjectivity' (Habermas 1989: 49).[1] Povinelli makes the clear point that the extent to which love emerges as a rejection of social utility, and the degree to which the intimate subject of sexuality develops in relation to an emancipation from social bonds is not something that can simply be generalised globally. The imposition of this particular grid of intimacy is necessarily, of course, a function of power (Povinelli 2002: 232), but in this article, I develop Povinelli's insight in an alternative direction demonstrating that the very assumption that the intimate subject develops in the context of an emancipation from kinship and the social bonds of marriage is itself another example of 'grid-lock'.

Of lies, damn lies and statistics

The KamaSutra Survey results were published in leading English-language dailies in India and generated a great deal of enthusiasm and consternation alike. The 5,213 participants in this online survey came from the urban centres of Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Pune, Lucknow and Chandigarh. The survey tabulated frequency, modes and/or objects of sexual arousal, foreplay, preferred sexual positions, modes of contraception, preferred fantasies, and views on homosexuality, fidelity, pre-marital sex, masturbation and sex education (Sawhney 2003a). It also presented in the form of league tables rates of sexual activity across the 10 cities. Reactions to the survey, therefore, were often as much about the sex-life of places as they were about people (see Fernandez 2003 for Bangalore; Sawhney 2003a for Delhi; Kuriakose 2003 for Hyderabad; Mitra 2003 for Kolkata).

[1] There is an extensive literature in both history and popular culture on the Habermasian notion of the public sphere in India, see for example Chakrabarty (1992); Dwyer and Pinney (2001); Frietag (1989); Mankekar (1999).

> Topping the survey on 'having sex' was the City of Hyderabad with 17.1 times a month. Even more astonishing is that Hyderabad leads the world in this hot pursuit. As per the Durex Global Survey, the nation of lovers, France, used to be accorded top position for having sex 167 times a year (13.1 times a month). But now Hyderabad has far overtaken France in terms of numbers. (Kuriakose 2003)

Whilst a Bangalore daily wrote:

> Consider this, only 68 per cent of the city [Bangalore] is satisfied with the amount of sex it gets every month — an average of 12.5 days totally, well ahead of the national average of once every four days, or about eight times a month. 32 per cent (31 pc nationally) however feel that this isn't enough and would like more. (Fernandez 2003)

The *Delhi Times* (a section of the *Times of India*), the newspaper that had first published the survey results, reported that it had been inundated with readers responses, and thus claimed that it felt compelled to publish a long successor piece in the form of a collection of unedited readers' responses to Delhi's sexual profile as presented in the survey (Sawhney 2003b). Regardless of their approbation or disapproval for sex surveys in general, most readers commended the newspaper for taking what they considered was a 'bold initiative'.

> Though it is disturbing to know that such a large number of teenagers are aware of their sexuality, perhaps earlier than their time, as parents, we would be naive to wish it away. Perhaps, we need to come to terms with it and deal with it in as sensitive a manner as possible. We can only hope that our set of values, on which we nurture them, makes them more responsible as young adults. Rajat (Sawhney 2003b)

> I must compliment you on the article 'More sex please, we're Indian'. Considering that 'sex' was a taboo topic till not too long ago, it is heartening to see that society has started accepting it as a reality and a fact of life. I hope *Delhi Times* continues publishing informative pieces reflecting the changing face of our times. R. Raman (Sawhney 2003b)

Prakash Kothari, a prominent sexologist and a well-recognised media talking-head was quoted as saying: 'One can easily kiss

that crummy era goodbye. A nation of one billion is getting sexy and kicking the guilt.' Another familiar name, psychiatrist and part-time agony uncle Sanjay Chugh added, 'In today's India, there has never been a better time to find answers, action and fulfilment. Expect the unexpected: Finally, 'it' is happening in India'. (Sawhney 2003a).

Unsurprisingly, not all reactions were so laudatory. One reader wrote in to convey the discomfort he felt as a parent explaining the term 'oral sex' to his 12-year-old daughter. Another, a left-wing student leader, was concerned not only about the validity of the survey, but also about the commodification of women as sex-objects that both the survey and the original news report portrayed (ibid.).

In these first reports, a majority of the 'experts' rolled in to interpret the results were interestingly, but not surprisingly, marriage counsellors. Some of them pointed out the skewed nature of the survey (e.g., Kavitha 2003). For example, they drew attention to the fact that only 12 per cent of the respondents were women. Since this had been a self-administered and partly online survey, they wondered why women had been reluctant to participate. Some reasoned that since some of the participants in the survey had answered the questionnaire online, the skewed sex ratio of the sample may well have to do with the differential online accessibility for men and women.[2] But beyond the occasional doubt cast by an expert, the statistical imbalances of the sample did not seem to cause much concern in the popular press. What did concern everybody, and came out loud and clear in almost every report, was that the survey provided evidence for a perceptible change in attitudes to sex, especially in women.

> [W]omen respondents [are] playing a far more active role in sexual encounters in general [...] Being less bound by old gender role stereotypes means many women now feel freer to show their partners what they like and dislike sexually. (Fernandez 2003)

[2] Despite these serious drawbacks, the internet is becoming a favoured tool for sex research. For a detailed discussion of its advantages and drawbacks, see Ross et al. (2005). Such a bias in internet surveys is common and systematic, and has much to do with the inability to control or indeed to know the sample frame in such surveys (cf. ibid.: 251).

The KamaSutra Survey caught the imagination of the media and the middle classes in urban India. In addition to opinion pieces in newspapers and magazines, and the inevitable yours-disgustedly letters to the editor, it also launched the age of sex-surveys in India. In particular, two leading news magazines have since 2003 conducted annual surveys devoted to particular aspects of the nation's sexual habits. In this article, I restrict myself to the first to take the lead on this issue, *India Today*, the English-language periodical with the highest circulation figures in its group, and an integral part of middle-class reading habits. It shifted the lens away from territorial sexual profiles, and as if by way of a corrective to the male bias of the KamaSutra Survey, carried a cover story in September 2003 entitled, 'On the Intimate Desires of the Indian Woman: The Sex Report' (Vasudev 2003). Based on a survey carried out by the magazine's research team in conjunction with a prominent market-research group, amongst 2,305 middle- and upper-middle class women across 10 cities, it claimed to be the first ever all-India survey conducted exclusively on women's views of their sexuality (ibid.: 34).

This survey enumerated women's awareness of their bodies, age of sexual discovery, division of sexual labour and pleasure, etc., and claimed to make available a wide range of 'facts' in the public domain for the first time. So, for example, according to the survey, 42 per cent of women knew where their 'G-spot' was, 32 per cent felt satisfied after a sexual encounter; 85 per cent first had sex only after marriage; but 52 per cent thought that their own pleasure was as important as their partner's while having sex (Vasudev 2003). Interestingly, the authors of the story too reported a popular perception that times were changing with regard to intimate lives of urban Indians, but they dismissed as an illusion the claim that there was 'a sexual revolution breathing fire in India' (ibid.: 36). They did, however, conclude that women in India were slowly emerging as sexually confident, if not assertive, beings. This change, according to them, was not an even or unidirectional one.

> The conflict is deep and searing, in the boiler room that is the Indian woman's mind, Vatsayana, Buddha, Freud, Foucault, Rajneesh, Shere Hite and Germaine Greer seem to be having a relentless screaming match. Sita and Kali pick up a fight. Sita, in her ever-relenting passive form, and Kali, intoxicated with power, blinded by rage, and voraciously sexual. It is too early on the rolls

> of India-in-transition to expect the women to resolve this literary-historical-traditional mess entirely and say, 'Yes, we want sex and how'. (Ibid.: 37)

The same magazine conducted another survey with the same team a year later, this time focusing on the 'libido of the Indian man' (Vasudev 2004a). This survey of 2,499 men similarly measured an array of sexual habits and preferences of Indian men, ranging from their favourite sexual fantasy to their favoured sexual position. The authors concluded that the results of the men's sexual habits seemed to be in agreement with the previous survey of women's sexuality, in that 'conflict defined their sexual freedom' (ibid.: 26). According to them, just like the previous women's survey, the results of the men's survey produced a picture of contradictions. 'In 2004 when freedom is a buzzword, Indian men seemed to be shackled by [the] myths of manhood' (ibid.: 28). They claimed that the results proved that Indian men had a very circumscribed idea of women's sexuality, in that they aspired for sex with 'coy, virginal, beautiful, sari-clad women, who should then become their wives. And once wedded, these women should neither fantasise in bed, nor ask for oral sex or deny sex to their husbands, whether they like sex or not' (ibid.: 26). They further remarked, '[i]ronic that in the land of the virile Shiva, the flirtatious Krishna and the incorrigible Vatsayana, today's Indian man willingly suffers the label of the prude' (ibid: 29). Indian men were seen to have a very narrow view of women's sexuality and considered it to lie primarily within the conjugal relationship. The authors based this conclusion on the survey's finding that both men and women expected and preferred men to be sexually experienced at the time of marriage, and women to be virgins. Yet, at the same time, the authors and their respondents were convinced that the bottom-line in people's intimate lives was change (Vasudev 2004b). What had changed was not the inextricability of sex and marriage — for both men and women — but the ways men and women negotiated these demands and expectations of sexual intimacy within the context of marriage.

Experts for the *India Today* surveys were drawn from a more varied background and included psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, sociologists, writers, film-makers and artists, that is, those who

understood, recorded and/or described patterns of social change. They in turn pointed out that no matter how emancipated urban Indian women had become, or were in the process of becoming, they continued to experience varying degrees of conflict between their new desires and social expectations. The evidence for this according to them was the great preponderance of the 'Don't Know' or 'Won't Say' as a majority response to questions relating to what may have been considered as controversial or uncomfortable issues. But in fact, the range of issues covered by the survey was vast and therefore, the 'Don't Know/Won't Say' responses across the questions were not exactly comparable. For instance, to the question, 'In which of the following places have you had sex? (outside the bedroom, in front of the mirror, in car/train/on beach, on the dining table)', 42 per cent or the 'Don't Know/Won't Say' option. Compared to 'Have you had extra-marital sex with any of the following (husband's friends, relatives, office colleagues, casual acquaintances)', when once again the majority (38 per cent) responded with a 'Don't Know/Won't Say'. These two sets of 'Don't Know/Won't Say' responses I believe belong to different registers of inhibition.

Men, on the other hand, provided clues to their inhibition by giving contradictory answers to questions relating to sex outside the conjugal relationship, according to the commentators. For example, 19 per cent of men admitted to having had a homosexual experience (73 per cent responded in the negative). But in response to a subsequent question 'Have you talked to your wife/girlfriend about your homosexual experiences?', 19 per cent said Yes, 35 per cent said No, and only 36 per cent said that they had not had a homosexual experience (Vasudev 2004b: 36).[3] These contradictory and/or inhibitory responses according to the authors, were triggered by the lack of fit between 'traditional' sexual roles and the demands of the changing times. As a psychiatrist noted for a similar high-level of 'Don't Know/Won't Say' responses in a subsequent survey focused on the sexual habits of the single Indian women,

[3] Non-commensurate data are recognised as commonplace in sex-surveys for a variety of reasons and are largely attributed to the lack of sample control, participation and recall bias, etc. For a detailed discussion of related methodological issues see, e.g., Touleman and Leridon (1998).

> [t]his dichotomy exists, because while she [the Indian woman] has been brought up to believe in traditional Indian values, she now has to contend with a quickly changing world. There is a definite improvement, but a woman still can't flaunt a relationship the way she can flaunt a husband. (*India Today*, 26 September 2005: 52)

The surveys and their accompanying commentaries sometimes reinforced received notions of the meaning of sexual intimacy for men and women. Confirming a popular perception that men and women are different kinds of sexual beings, for example, one wrote

> There is one indisputable fact, however, and that is that men have polygamous tendencies while women tend to be monogamous. In surveys conducted around the world in the past 25 years, men have consistently reported more sexual partners than women did. That is perhaps explained by the general perception that women invest more of themselves in sexual relationships than men do. (Bobb 2004: 50)

The magazine further examined the changing Indian woman and in a nod to an emerging lack of fit between marriage and sexual activity in urban India, it commissioned its third survey, in 2005, on Sex and the Single Woman.

> Free from the burden of her barren sexual history, [the single woman] is looking fearlessly into a future teeming with sensual possibilities. Armed with a curious mix of homely family values and liberal feminist notions, she is carving out her sexual persona, telescoping that change with her emergence as a social, not just domestic, being. (Bamzai 2005: 33)

Nevertheless, it claimed that whilst 33 per cent of women interviewed in 11 cities, had had pre-marital sex, a good 65 per cent of them thought that both women and men should remain virgins till they are married (Bamzai 2005: 34). Most of those who approved of pre-marital sex preferred that this was either in the context of long-term relationships and/or romantic love. In any case, pre-marital sex did not obviate the possibility of marriage. It was precisely that, pre the fact of marriage: 'Everything conspires to ensure that a woman weds' (ibid.: 38). Thus, even for a good

number of those who had experimented with sex outside marriage, the conjugal bond was the inevitable context for sexual intimacy, if not the most sacred, then the most legitimate.

The KamaSutra and the *India Today* surveys partially managed to pare apart sexual intimacy from conjugality in the public domain by making people think of sex in its own terms, in terms of its constituent acts and its anatomical and other geographies. But for the moment I want to attend to the conjugal imperative and its significance in understanding the peculiarities of the urban Indian intimacy grid. In the following section I turn to the way in which women narrate their understanding and experience of sexual intimacy and examine the extent to which the conjugal imperative informs the language and experience of intimacy.

What the body remembers

Geetan Batra, an independent journalist, began collecting women's narratives of their sexual histories in the early 1990s, most of which are now available on *Tehelka*, a popular, if not uncontroversial web portal, as part of its Erotic channel within its Lifestyle section.[4] Collated under the title *What the Body Remembers*, some of these sexual histories are also available on the Sex Education section of KamaSutra's own website.[5] As in the case of the KamaSutra and the *India Today* sex-surveys, Batra's respondents were middle-class urban Indians. In distinction from the earlier surveys, the respondents were exclusively women and had not been questioned according to an interview schedule. There are therefore no statistics, no results. Instead, there are 80 narratives of sexual histories of middle- to upper-class, educated, married, single divorced, women, some of them professionals and others housewives.

If the sex-surveys claimed to provide cross-sectional snapshots of attitudes to sexual intimacy in India, then these narratives were meant to be a full-blooded and embodied account of women's experiences of sexual intimacy in their own words. Batra's own

[4] www.tehelka.com/lifestyle/erotic/wtbr.htm. The Tehelka portal was a pioneer in its early days being the first independent news portal in India, and was associated with serious investigative journalism.

[5] www.ksontheweb.com.

commentary in the form of an accompanying post on the history and the methodology of this collection emphasises the 'non-fragmentary' nature of this material. According to her, once she had collected this material she did not want to convert it into a book because she did not want to render yet another Hite Report or a Nancy Friday.[6] In choosing not to present the material as bite-sized truths about women's understanding of their sexuality, the aim of this exercise seemed to be exactly the opposite to that of the surveys. There were to be no generalisations, comparisons, commonalities and differences offered for these 80 narratives, but just first person accounts.

> Yes, my sex life has changed in the past few years. For a couple of years after I moved away from my husband there was nothing — oh, it was because we were basically incompatible, no dramatic beatings or fights. I just moved away. We were too different. I have a daughter; she was my greatest worry. Sex doesn't even count when you are making decisions like that. So I guess sex isn't that important to me in the long run because I did have good sex with my husband, but it didn't matter. When I realised that there was nothing between us except sex, it was easy to move out [...] I had been working before that [i.e., marriage] and the hollowness of the city boys had gotten to me. I thought a small town person will have more time to think and will be a more sensitive soul — I was wrong. But no, we are talking sex — so okay — once we got engaged, I still couldn't go the full way, I used to want it but just couldn't do it.
>
> [...] Then we got married. By then I had begun to have some doubts — I don't know why I went through with it [...] It started to go bad once I became pregnant which was within two months of getting married. He still wanted to carry on with the same lifestyle, eating out, boozing, sleeping late — but I couldn't cope. Sex became a chore. Anyway, once my kid was born I tried for sometime to tolerate him. The only time I was at peace with him was when we were making out [...] but after a time it didn't matter. I just left one day — it was a trial but I just didn't go back. (Yashika, 34, media person)

[6] Research interview by Batra, 30 January 2003, New Delhi.

Or a slightly different one

> It's strange to be talking of sex at this age, especially since I haven't thought about it in the past 3 or 4 years. So when you ask me whether my sex life has changed, well, it has become non-existent. There is no sense of loss where just sex is concerned, I don't think of it, so I don't need it. I miss a person. It's a whole being I miss. The physical aspect of our relationship had declined some time ago — about 6 years ago — because he had started keeping very ill. (Shivangi, 48, IT professional – What the Body Remembers)

In a study of middle-class Indian women's understanding of their own sexuality, Jyoti Puri collected 54 sexual histories from a similar urban social strata (Puri 1999). Puri places these narratives within the context of the demands of nationalism and postcoloniality on gendered identities and sexual subjectivities. In Puri's understanding, the cultural valorisation of virginity and the conjugal imperative have the effect of eroticising marital life and romanticising marital sexuality (ibid.: 119). According to her, despite being the primary (in the sense of the first as well as in the sense of the foremost) space for experiencing sexual intimacy, marriage itself is attached with differing rationales and valence (ibid.: 133). Because legitimate sexual intimacy is confined within the conjugal relationship for women, its experience oscillates between pleasure and duty. This oscillation is reflected sometimes in the denial of pleasure altogether and at others in inflecting the language of romance, or the more acceptable cultural language of duty and companionship.

> It was a total new feeling about sex after marriage. I think a woman experiencing it after marriage will be more satisfied, and she will feel more good if she has not done anything before marriage. [...]
>
> I think a husband and wife come closer with sex, become closer, and the love bond also increases. Physical is a part of our marriage, it is a must and is compulsory [...] for me sexual satisfaction is to satisfy my husband [...]
>
> I like watching romantic scenes in Indian films, I daydream and place myself and my husband in a dance sequence, kissing sequence, or even a bed scene [...]

> Before marriage I was closest to my mother, after marriage, of course my husband [...] we both share everything with each other [...] that way we have an excellent relationship. (Puri 1999: 106–07)

> At first I thought that [sex] has a very large role [in marriage], but when I look at my personal life, then it does not appear to me that it has any role at all. In my relations it has a very minor, minor role. In effect, major role is *sentimental* attachment, how much we care for each other. (Puri 1999: 129, emphasis added)

> I think for a person like me mental happiness is very important. I need to be mentally relaxed. So I never wanted it [sex]. It is *my duty to please him*, and so I do it. Otherwise, given a choice, I don't mind living without it so far. I am not saying I have never enjoyed it at all or enjoyed it ever. Maybe when I am happy. Then of course when we come closer, it's fine. But not otherwise and not very frequently. (Puri 1999: 120, emphasis added)

In some ways Batra's admitted failure to convert her research into a book of an unknown desired shape is testimony to the argument of the article regarding language. That is to say, there remain several difficulties within expressive as well as explanatory genres that inhibit the ability to think about intimate lives by and of urban Indians outside certain prescribed formats. Puri notes that stereotypical connections between gender role and sexuality in India, within scholarship as well as ordinary language-use, pose the biggest stumbling block in re-conceptualising these connections (Puri 1999: 4–6). In consonance with Batra's observations (and in some ways with the surveys' findings), she too notes that despite the handicap of the paucity of language, women's own narratives belie traditional understandings of the connections between Indian women's role in family and kinship and their ability to experience and define sexual intimacies (ibid.: 103–33). This explanation is important although as I argue later in the article, not the sole and adequate explanation. But what is striking about these narratives is that even though the women who were interviewed were asked to reflect on what they thought about sexuality and to narrate their sexual histories, most of them ended up talking about their ideals

and expectations of conjugal intimacy.[7] This finds agreement with Puri's narratives, which are either elicited to speak of intimate life-history in the conjugal frame or indeed the narrators themselves develop their histories of sexual intimacy mostly within the experience of marital relationships.[8] The dominance of marriage as the frame for recognising sexual intimacy, in personal narrative, popular imagination, or indeed scholarship, remains unassailable, and it is this inextricability that frames popular ideals and expectations of intimacy.

> I do have frequent sexual urges and since I read somewhere marriage provides the highest opportunity for sex, guess I often feel dissatisfied with myself or perhaps it's my aging hormones that are going haywire. Desire is the root cause of life. As long as my desire lives within me, there is hope for sexuality in my life. (Madhavi, 33, single, engineer – What the Body Remembers)

> I think sex in India should be more open, we should be more experimental about gay or lesbian love, even try out some affairs before marrying. We lack the strength to try it, out of fear. Fear puts a wet cloth on pre-marital sex and after marriage, it is boredom. (Sumana, 28, housewife – What the Body Remembers)

The encapsulation of sexuality within the conjugal relationship is further intensified with an accompanied expectation of romance in marriage. The romantic ideal defines women's expectations of

[7] This is a different strategy of eliciting these narratives, say from the one reported by Puri, where she asked women to reflect on their identities as women and experiences of womanhood around culturally recognised life-stage landmarks such as menarche, menstruation, loss of virginity, marriage, etc., (Puri 1999: 20). See Kakar (1989) for a sustained discussion of the relationship between mythological and popular narratives of love, desire and intimacy and how these frame individual narratives and expectations.

[8] Puri herself ascribes bias in her material to the relatively small number of women (12/50) who had had pre-marital sexual relationships, and even then this was mostly with the person they were engaged to be married to (Puri 1999: Chapter 5). In any case, one does not get any direct and pointed discussion of this slippage, either from the women interviewed, or indeed from Puri herself.

conjugality and intimacy, since not only sex but romance too is meant to be located primarily within marriage — at least for women. These narratives reveal the overextended conjugal complex, and lay bare what has often been called the gender division of emotion and 'emotion work' (Duncombe and Marsden 1993).

> But with Varun it (sexual intercourse) became just an exercise, there was no romance, while I lived with a whole lot of romantic notions and wanted a display of emotion. He wasn't an emotional person, he'd giggle and talk in a very dispassionate way [...] I think men are completely insensitive sexually. Most of them can't understand the baggage most of us women come with. Most men look at me as a sexual object [...] They have to learn to be friends. My last boyfriend, he thinks he is on the same wavelength that I am on because he gets turned on by me. If I am not turned on by him, he thinks I have a problem, they'll never take a no — it makes them insecure. For men sex is just sex. (Teesta, 27, researcher – What the Body Remembers)

> Men in general are very insensitive. They don't think emotionally about the future, they will make investments financially but they won't think of their women during the day and what life is for them when they aren't around. (Rachana, 34, housewife – What the Body Remembers)

> Socially, we are both compatible, but sexually and mentally we are different. If you are different in ideas and thoughts, you are bound to not make very good love together. But we are like a pair of old shoes now, comfortable to live in with each other. It took him fairly long to understand me, but now it is easy to live with him. I don't have to make anymore compromises.

> I can't ever blame anyone for affecting our sex lives. From the beginning, we have had different expectations and needs [...] I would have loved an affair. I have fantasised about it. It's just the need to feel wanted and understood. (Tina, 50, secretary – What the Body Remembers)

Whilst popular culture codifies the distinction between marriage and pleasure for men in the distinct roles played by the figures of the wife and the courtesan, there is no such experiential or

explanatory template for women.[9] It is therefore not surprising that urban Indian women believe that women and men have very different expectations from an intimate relationship. Importantly, if not unsurprisingly, these narratives signal the presence of other aesthetics of attachment outside the framework of heterosexual conjugality, sometimes revealed as fantasy and/or desire. This dissonance gestures a lack of fit between expectations and experience of intimate life, which is further compounded by the paucity of the language of expression for articulating the experience and/or expectations of sexual intimacy in urban India.

In the discussion of intimacy in India, the question of language gains a second-order significance as well, and that is to do with the choice of language. The narratives of sexual histories, like the surveys discussed above, have been elicited in the English language. Whilst Batra does not elaborate on the significance of the language, Puri attributes the use of English to a broader invocation of 'transnational discourses of sex and romantic love and spoken English to accommodate and challenge the constraints on erotic sexuality' (Puri 1999: 133). This is in keeping with what has been noted elsewhere in scholarship.

> Indian languages have a wide range of ways to express love [...] Yet, in cinema, where the expression or declaration of love is demanded, it is often the three English words which are used rather than their Hindi-Urdu equivalents. This may be due to the language of love having been influenced by the English idiom, or could be simply a fashion in popular culture, showing the use of the global language. A likely cause is also that this is part of the prohibition of the display of the private [...], in that saying something in the formal register of English is less intimate than an expression in one's mother tongue. (Dwyer 2000: 112)

Given the educational background of the majority of these individuals, women and men, a defining feature of middle-class status is language and (English) language-use. The roots of this

[9] For more, see Uberoi (2001). On the constitution of masculinity in contemporary India see Chopra, Osella, and Osella (2004). On colonial codification of masculinity see Nandy (1988); Sinha (1995).

contradiction go back to the status of English as a language of rule during colonialism, and today take on diverse manifestations.[10] It has been long acknowledged that there is something about sex and the Indian bourgeoisie that does not translate well into the vernacular, or in other words, bourgeois India talk of the erotic and the amorous in English (Dwyer 2000). 'Middle-class behaviour is figured symptomatic of the social contradictions that beset Indian modernity. The severity of the diagnosis is only heightened by the implication that precisely the middle classes should know better' (Mazzarella 2005: 5).

The question of the language of expression is important not only because of the public declaration of intimate emotion that Dwyer is concerned with, but because of the way language shapes people's experiences and conceptualisations of intimacy, sex and love. Ken Plummer has argued that sexual story-telling brings about an imagining, articulating and inventing of sexual identities, ultimately creating a culture of public concern around these issues (Plummer 1996). Lest we think that this is a world of endless possibilities, and boundless creativity, we must also remind ourselves that narratives of sexual histories, as those collected by Batra and Puri, are framed within familiar sociological anchors. Their particular language, form and shape is determined by the conversational constraints placed by these very sociological anchors. So, whilst the public presentation of the surveys and narratives afforded new spaces for the re-negotiation of meanings, making new things say-able, imaginable, possibly do-able, these new grids of intimacy were constrained by, made sense of and contained within already familiar grids of intimacy. It is therefore no surprise that not only is the narration of sexuality cast within and around conjugality, but that even the statistical expression of sexuality meanders around it.

[10] Bernard Cohn (1996) alerted us to the hegemonic structures that underpinned code-switching between the vernacular and English in his most aptly entitled 'The command of language and the language of command'. See also, Nandy (1988).

The measure of intimacy

Certainly, it seems that the idea of the sex survey has caught on in the imagination of the Indian middle classes. This in itself is not surprising. For example, in the United States, post-Kinsey, the growing interest in the measurement of sexuality led to development of the commercial sex survey, becoming a regular feature in the popular press (Ericksen 1999), and post-Little Kinsey in the United Kingdom (Stanley 1995), to name only two contexts. This is not least because it helps to sell the relevant publication. It has been argued for the United States that the very popularity of the sex survey leads to its transformation as ultimately frivolous entertainment (Ericksen 1999: 156).[11] In the case of the *India Today* surveys, however, the purported aim has been far from frivolous. In his editorial to the 2005 survey, Aroone Purie notes:

> In 2003 when INDIA TODAY commissioned the first-ever survey of sexual attitudes of women [...], it set off a firestorm of protest. While researchers were roughed up by brothers and husbands of those who were being interviewed, many readers apparently wanted to do the same to us — everyone, it seemed, had a secret life which they didn't want out in the open.
>
> [...] Don't shoot the messenger. Read the message instead.[12]

In the case of India thus, the situation was slightly different. The magazines believed that they were not only following their brief in reporting that something new was happening in society, but that they thought it to be their responsibility of outing sex to society, so to speak, to reveal 'the secret life' everyone seems to have, and make it public. But the significant question is why have the last few years seen an immense surge in the popularity of such lifestyle based surveys and polls in the popular media.

[11] Ericksen is referring to magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, etc., producing self-administered mini surveys that become part of the self-help culture propagated in and through the popular press.

[12] *India Today*, September 2005: 3.

It is notable that in the case of India, the 'original' sex survey was itself a commercial survey, in that it was carried out by a condom manufacturer, and thus bore a brand name, as opposed to that of the researchers'. Not only that, it was part of the parent brand's (Durex) 'global' sex survey. That this survey presented its findings in the form of a league table of frequency distributed over locations is therefore not surprising. Nevertheless, the KamaSutra survey was a landmark — not for what it measured, not for its accuracy or its reliability, but it was a landmark because it allowed for a public delinking of sexual activity from its relational context of conjugality. It spoke of sex in its own terms, on a global scale (Paris and Hyderabad, Pune and Osaka, New Delhi and Mexico City). It therefore allowed for an understanding of conjugal intimacy through a measure of sexual practice, rather than the convention of the other way round. It was this reversal that gave an appearance that the nature of sexual intimacy had changed in India, whereas what had happened was that an altogether new baseline had been forged. This was the way in which a new intimacy grid was attempted in public discourse in India. In the following passages I explore the ways in which these surveys were set within a particular intimate grid, and why that particular intimate grid found resonance amongst urban Indians at the time that it did.

One reason for the growing popularity of sex surveys is of course the growth of consumerism and consumer culture in the last decade in India. The phenomenon of lifestyles themselves becoming part of consumption patterns has received some sociological and anthropological attention (Featherstone 1990; Mazzarella 2003; Miller 2001). But could there be another explanation? I believe that an important purpose served by these opinion polls is to provide an occasion to talk about social phenomenon in the language of 'change'. It is not important whether or not the change that is being talked about has taken place or not or whether it has been accurately comprehended by the poll or survey. What these surveys do is feed into the rhetoric of change that is part of the larger discourse of modernity. Statements like 'India is changing', 'Indian society is changing', 'Indian values are changing' are commonplace in popular imagination. They are not just imbued with clunky reifications, but also provide the grid within which survey numbers

come alive and make sense, even though those figures may be the first of their kind and hence without any comparative baseline (as in the case of the *India Today* surveys).

I argue that there is yet another (and perhaps a more important) reason why these surveys form an important source for anthropologists despite the obvious question mark over their representativeness, accuracy and methodological rigour (Poovey 1998). The sociological import of any survey lies in not what the survey actually measures, whether people answer truthfully, and what those results are, but what happens once such material is presented as enumerated data and circulated in the public sphere. In the context of my research this provides a cue to raise two separate yet linked methodological issues. The first is the way these surveys enumerate the activities of a certain section of the urban Indian population and how their results get circulated. The second is the micro processes through which popular culture gets transformed.

> I was looking forward to it. I didn't read any books or see a blue movie to excite me. That's what one of my family members said. She said you will feel more excited. I said, 'Sorry, I don't feel it necessary to excite me through those media. My husband will be enough to excite me.' He was very nice to know what I would feel like. He read it for me. He knew that I didn't have any serious boyfriends so I was basically ignorant about these things [...] It was just the fact that it was new for me, I had never been through it [...]. (Puri 1999: 117)

In 2006, of course, such a narrator would have read a few cover-stories in the popular press that gave her information on not just her own sexual anatomy, but also provided benchmarks to assess whether or not her marital sexuality was shaping up in any 'normal' sort of way. What the sex surveys have done in urban India is to dislodge the knowing-aunt and the telling older-cousin from their erstwhile nodal positions in the routes of the circulation of information on sexuality. This is not to say that such significant others have been made redundant but that alternate routes have been forged, that necessarily speak of sex in a new language as discussed above.

My interest here is in raising a methodological issue on how information in the public sphere circulates. Hacking (1994) and Taylor (1987) have alerted us in different ways to the constitutive significance of categories in the public domain, or what Hacking has called the 'looping effect'. While Taylor points out the importance of shared language and of knowing that it is shared in the context of understanding how texts become sources of objectification, Hacking employs the term 'looping effect' to connote the process by which categories — when inserted in the public domain — become constitutive of future behaviour, whether or not such behaviour conformed to those categories before their introduction (Hacking 1994).

One of the things statistics does is to introduce imagined norms. This normalising aesthetic provides people with mental images of whether their own behaviour conforms or not. The results of the KamaSutra and *India Today* surveys therefore introduced benchmarks of various kinds, howsoever inaccurate, through which and in terms of which people in urban India can judge their own sex lives. Crucially, these surveys projected information about sex and sexual behaviour into the public domain as if it was a kind of information or knowledge that had never existed before (see Purie's editorial comments on page 157). Thus, those who read the reports were perhaps introduced to a new way of relating to their sexuality, i.e., where it fitted in terms of their friends', neighbours', or indeed their countrymen's.

Zygmunt Bauman has argued that:

> Eroticism [...] has become a sort of Jack-of-all-trades, desperately seeking a secure abode and steady job yet fearing the prospect of finding them [...] This circumstance makes it available for new kinds of social uses, sharply different from the ones known from most of modern history [...] The first is the deployment of eroticism in the postmodern construction of identity. The second is the role played by eroticism in servicing the network of interpersonal bonds on the one hand, and the separatist battles of individualisation on the other. (Bauman 1998)

Women interviewed by Batra and Puri seem to be doing precisely both these things. They may appear to be caught out by

the paucity of language in which to express their expectations and experiences of desire outside a framework of conjugal expectations. Their narratives can be seen as a careful rendition or articulation of their sexual subjectivities. The language that is deployed therefore often depends on the idiom available in popular magazines, fiction or romantic novels, as reported by the women themselves.[13] The narratives may thus have little aesthetic embellishment and sometimes sound stilted. What is expressed therefore is not just the actualities of the encounter, but importantly how these actualities are refracted through sociological anchors or reference points, such as virginity, motherhood, homosexuality, etc. Desire and pleasure assume a language that is more easily acceptable and perhaps better understood, that is one of romantic love. Romantic love thus works to make sex a specific cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to aspirational forms of intimacy (Giddens 1992).

> But when I had intercourse a couple of years later, while in college, I saw no stars. It was an extremely messy affair. I don't know why such a fuss is made of sex. I thought it would be so wonderful the first time. But yes, it got better with time and I try to warn some of my friends who are on the verge of getting married that sex is not a romantic affair. I still long for that tobacco kiss [...] (Ishika, 23, student, single – What The Body Remembers)

The transformations of intimacy

Pleasure, attachment and subjectivity are the axes around which ideals of intimacy are chased and judged. These aspirations and judgements are internalised as part of the inner life, the most private aspect of oneself. However, as we have seen, this inner world is anchored in the discursive and the public. Ideals and expectations of pleasure and desire in urban India are framed by the discourse on conjugality, which in turn is shaped by not just the cultural and the social, but the national and indeed the global. Hence people articulate the awareness of their intimate selves both in terms

[13] In fact, according to a vast number of these narratives, these were also the sources from which women get a preliminary insight into sex and sexuality.

of the experienced as well as the aspired. The imagined norms too operate simultaneously at the level of the personal ('Am I getting enough sex?', 'Why don't men think emotionally?', 'Why do women confuse sex with love?') and at the level of the social ('Ahmedabad sexy *chhe*'. 'Hyderabad is more happening than Paris'. 'We Indians are like that only').

The reason that these surveys come rolling in one after another at the time they do has equally to do with the specificities of the time. The popular image of India amongst the middle classes is one of an emerging global power, within which the middle classes are themselves positioned as drivers of change. There is a thin form of nationalism that gets refracted in these surveys and commentaries, which has to do with a 'keeping up with the times'. It is in this context that commentators admonish the Indian Man for being conservative, for not keeping up, for not being global enough. At the same time, the sexual subject that is constituted through these exercises is the unitary global Indian, where class, caste, ethnicity, community seem to have little bearing.

The language may not be precise, but as Hacking has argued the 'looping effect' of language, cognition and agency is a complex one (Hacking 1994: 358). Surveys, whether accurate or not, provide data about 'kinds of people'. These 'kinds of people' enter popular discussions and private narratives in a way that allows for the evaluation of one's own actions and the actions of others. The fact that in contemporary India certain 'kinds of people' in the realms of sex, love, intimacy and desire are said to be changing is a fascinating anthropological problem. This is partly because we cannot evaluate from a social science perspective exactly what the nature of the change is, even though the individuals surveyed, and the experts consulted all agreed that change is indeed taking place. The reason for this is that it is impossible to establish with any clarity what the baseline is against which such change should be judged. This is not just because sex surveys and the collection of sexual histories by social scientists is something new in the context of India, but because such surveys and narratives can only ever exist within their own terms. That is, within the linguistic, conceptual and agentic forms in which they are currently available

to us. In the absence of detailed historiography the baseline remains a fictionalised 'before' that we cannot establish as an empirical entity or even deconstruct effectively.

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